

## A conversation with Scott Berkun

The former Microsoft manager whose 2007 book set out to identify, explore and, using often-amusing-and-always-enlightening lessons from history, debunk myths about innovation, talks about flexibility, looking at things in context, his worst idea in some time, and why the best thing you can sometimes do is make fun of yourself.

**In *The Myths of Innovation*, published in 2007 by O'Reilly Media and selected by Amazon.com as a Top 100 choice of 2007, you go behind-the-scenes of many of history's best-known innovators and inventions – Newton, Alexander Graham Bell, Craig Newmark (founder of Craigslist.org), Thomas Edison, Linus Torvalds (Linux) to name a few. Did you come out of all your research and writing with a favorite?**

I don't have a favorite. All the stories, once you get down to the truth, are just so bizarre. From a writing perspective though, there was definitely a story that made me confident in the theme of the book ... and it wasn't a story I found early on. Months into the writing, I stumbled upon a bio of Isaac Newton that delved into the apple-falling-on-his-head-leading-to-the-understanding-of-gravity story. And of course the real truth is that the apple-on-the-head is a myth. Newton didn't discover gravity any more than Columbus discovered America; he spent years and years working to explain, through math, how gravity works. It is a perfect encapsulation of one of the most important ideas in the book – the mythology of the magic moment. Instead of hard work, personal risk and sacrifice, which is the truth, the myth suggests that great ideas come to people who are lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. That's just not the way innovation happens.

**While all of these types of tales are included to prove your points, they also happen to be great little bits of information you can't help but want to share with others – say, that there's a theory the invention of the Clipper ship led to the Irish Potato Famine. How much did you bore friends with all of these little factoids?**

My wife is probably the greatest victim. I was constantly going to her with questions I knew she would think she knew the answer to – say, the Wright brother's story. And of course I was only asking because the real answer was totally different – and so improbable -- from the one she thought was right. After a couple of months, she got used to that pattern of behavior from me though. It wasn't quite so much fun anymore. But I'd still do it.

**So, having studied innovators throughout history, do you think great intellect is a requirement to innovate?**

No, at least not with how intellect is stereotypically defined – as being good with math and research. Intellect in that sense of the word isn't that important.

### **If analytical abilities don't do much for innovators, what does?**

Flexibility. If you were to make a timeline of the path from having an idea to having an innovation – calling an innovation something you've made, sold and that is widely adopted and makes the world a better place -- there is a huge diversity in the kinds of abilities you need to tackle all the different challenges you face along the way. In the beginning, passion and creative thinking are important. But then, almost inevitably, innovators get to a point where they've solved the major problem, but minor problems surface and require an analytical or logical mind. And then, at the end, innovators need to be persuasive when selling and marketing their product or idea. So, to pick one word, an innovator needs to be flexible enough in their own mind to do all this or flexible enough to realize their own strengths and weaknesses and call on others when they need help.

### **Do you consider yourself an innovator?**

Not really. I think of myself as a creative person, as someone who takes risks, is passionate and likes to solve tricky problems. I don't think there are many people who consider themselves innovators. It seems innovators are created more by public perception than self-labeling.

### **Four words you'd never use to describe yourself?**

(After many seconds of awkward silence and groaning.) Tall, egotistical, too serious, boring.

### **Your style is pretty irreverent. I don't know that I've ever laughed so much while reading a heavily footnoted business book. Is that something you consciously made a decision to do, or is that just you?**

It was conscious in that it is a way to connect with people. If I'm able to make someone smile or laugh, or just sigh – any kind of emotional response -- that opens them up more to whatever it is I have to say and I'm talking to them at their level. For general-purpose writing, I think that is almost always a good thing for writers to do – you're connecting with readers. And I do feel that that is just my personality as well. It did take a long time for me to learn how translate that part of my personality to paper though, where no one hears my voice or sees my facial expressions and body movements.

### **Do you find that people take you less seriously because you're making historically-staid topics fun and even describe your public speaking skills as "kick ass?"**

I think it is self-selecting. There probably are people who see that 'kick ass' comment on my web page and are not going to read anymore. I prefer to work with people who have a sense of humor and prefer to speak to groups of people who like to laugh. I know I've spoken at events where I have offended people though. There would be something wrong as a creative person if what I did was so safe that I never upset or offended anyone; that means I'm not really enlightening anyone either.

**You talk about the importance to innovators of taking breaks and of not being busy all the time. Or, for those who have to be productive every single moment, at switching gears and working on a different type of product. Do you follow your own advice?**

Definitely. I agree with Freeman Dyson, a world-class physicist and author who said, "I think it is very important to be idle ... people who keep themselves busy all the time are generally not creative. So I am not ashamed of being idle."

**Well, what do you do?**

It changes all the time. I get bored very easily. If I'm stuck working on an essay, and I feel like I need to be productive, I try to switch to writing something else. I'm still producing something, but thinking about something else. If I want to take a total break, I'll either grab my guitar and sing and play horribly or I will go outside and chase my dogs.

**In a Lifehack.com interview you say that you often get ideas for topics to write on from thinking about things you wish someone else would write, but hasn't. Or, you'll find it and see another way to attack the same question. One of your most popular online articles is Why Smart People Defend Bad Ideas. How did that piece come about?**

Further proving that one of the myths I talk about in the book is indeed a myth, I don't know that there was a specific moment that idea was born. I was just always amazed to find smart, impressive people not only defending ideas that are so flawed, but also, because they are known to be smart, getting others to believe them. The problem seemed so obvious and it seemed obvious someone needed to write about it. I decided to take a stab.

**What's been a bad idea you've had?**

Renting a camper and driving around the South Island of New Zealand on a recent vacation. It's a very popular way to vacation down there, but I became entirely miserable in this camper van for five days. I was cranky, stressed out and entirely unpleasant. It was the worst idea I've had in a long time.

**When did you admit it was a bad idea?**

Not fully until after we had returned it. As soon as we checked into a hotel, I turned into Happy Scott. That was when I fully recognized how miserable I had been and how much frustration I had unnecessarily caused my wife.

**You talk about fear being a huge hurdle for innovators. Is there an innovation out there now that scares you?**

Every technology is good and bad depending on who's using it and what they're using it for. There's always going to be a negative side effect. In order to figure out what to be afraid of, you have to have some kind of context. If you're thinking about the future of the planet and the environment, which I often do, then nearly all innovations in technology are totally scary because it's more stuff in the landfill. But I'm not afraid of any specific innovations; I'm afraid of the culture that invents new technologies that result only in tiny improvements in productivity or pleasure. I don't think we need to be more productive. We already get every little bit of value out of every moment.

**What's the most intimidating thing you've ever done?**

That question above about the four words I'd never use to describe myself is pretty close. Another thing would be quitting my job at Microsoft in 2003 to write books and do public speaking. The idea of quitting freaked me out.

**Assuming you're no longer freaked out by the fact you quit Microsoft, when was it that you stopped freaking out?**

It's kind of funny, as soon as it went from idea to reality, the fear went away. I had quit and I didn't die and the universe didn't end. After that, I knew that whatever happened, I'd be better for it.

**You say the tightrope between being strange and being creative is too narrow to walk without occasionally landing on both sides ... what happens when you land on the strange side?**

Depends on who's watching. Sometimes when I'm with people and I'm saying something totally bizarre, it can be a trigger for them and they take my bizarre idea, tweak it and turn it into something useful. Then there are the cases I am up in front of a crowd and I say something bizarre and everyone gets uncomfortable. Being a good public speaker is understanding your audience in real time. And no matter what kind of audience you have, self-deprecation is always your way out. You can never go wrong with self-deprecation. I can always make fun of myself in some way and that gets everyone back on the same page and comfortable again.

**Is there one thing about yourself you most often make fun of?**

No, it wouldn't be fair. I've got so much to work with. I took a class in improvisational theater and it helped teach me how to make fun of myself in the way most appropriate for the situation.

**What's an innovation that you could live without?**

Cell phones. Without hesitation. I'm a total technology resister. I think technology is useful, but the less technology you use everyday, probably the happier you'd be. I do have a cell phone by necessity, but I turn it off lots of the time. One of my greatest annoyances is other people on cell phones. I would gladly give up my cell phone to have others give up theirs as well.

In addition to authoring *The Myths of Innovation*, Scott Berkun's first book, *Making Things Happen*, is being reissued next month. He also works as a consultant and public speaker.

**Read his blog at [www.scottberkun.com](http://www.scottberkun.com).**